Strong, New Incentives To Complete Conservation Plans

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Helping people solve soil and water resource problems is the major work of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). SCS employees have assisted land users in preparing and applying conservation plans for more than 50 years. SCS assistance is based on conservation planning—a process now made especially important by the provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985.

The Food Security Act of 1985

The Food Security Act (FSA) of 1985 includes conservation plans in Federal legislation for the first time. Producers who intend to continue cropping highly erodible land must produce their crops according to a conservation system in order to remain eligible for certain U.S. Department of Agriculture program benefits. All such producers must develop a conservation plan by January 1, 1990, and all the erosion control practices must be installed by January 1, 1995.

Although conservation plans have been used previously as the basis for longterm contracts to apply conservation practices, as in the Great Plains Conservation Program, the FSA goes beyond a contract and requires the producer to use the conservation plan for the indefinite future to maintain eligibility.

In view of the FSA requirements, SCS will need to help develop new conservation plans with about half of the participating producers and review and possibly revise the existing conservation plans of others before the January 1, 1990 deadline.

Conservation Planning

The conservation planning process is the same whether it is used with an individual landowner, a group of landowners, or a city council. However, most conservation plans are developed with individual farm or ranch owners or operators or small groups of them to help solve one or more common problems.

The conservation planning process is based on the producer being the decisionmaker. The SCS employee presents several alternative solutions to the resource problems, complete with costs and benefits, to the producer/cooperator. If producers recognize their resource problems and

Contour stripcropping, a conservation practice, controls soil erosion in this Iowa cornfield. A soil conservationist (left) and farmer review the conservation plan for the farm. (Gene Alexander, SCS)

can choose from among several alternative solutions, any one of which meets their objectives for the use of the land, then they will develop and apply the conservation plan.

Through the past 20 years, SCS has helped conservation district cooperators develop an average of 60,000 conservation plans on 23 million acres a year. In 1983 conservation plans were developed for a peak of 37 million acres. These acres are not cumulative because many farms change hands and new plans are developed with the new owners.

After the planned conservation practices are applied, they must be maintained to be sure that the benefits of the investment in conservation are fully realized. Technical assistance may be needed from time to time to help the producer consider the best way to

carry out the maintenance work and also ways to avoid or reduce future maintenance requirements. The amount of maintenance needed by a conservation practice should be considered before selecting the practice.

Conservation plans must be revised as technology, markets, and export needs change. The conservation planning process is flexible enough to permit the development of a revised plan that usually becomes necessary because of a change in the producer's objectives.

Resource Management Systems

SCS employees encourage the land user to plan and apply conservation treatments that will fully protect the soil and water resources. This protection is provided by installing and maintaining Resource Management Systems.

A resource management system is a combination of conservation practices and management measures that, when applied to the land, will protect the soil, water, and related resources. A conservation plan can show how such a system may be installed. If all agricultural fields had resource management systems, soil erosion rates would be reduced and the Nation's productive capacity would be assured. In addition to reducing erosion, resource management systems deal with five other resource concerns.

Resource Concerns

"Resource concerns" is a term used to categorize the kinds of soil and water resource problems that any land use can introduce. The concept of resource concerns was established to ensure that all of the existing soil and water resource problems would be identified and addressed in the conservation planning process. The concept enables the conservationist to quantify just how well a problem has been solved or alleviated.

The major resource concerns are:

- Erosion control
- Water disposal
- Animal wastes and agricultural chemical management
- Resource management
- Water management
- Offsite effects

All soil and water resource problems fall within these six resource concerns.

When all of the identified resource concerns on a land unit have been treated to reach their respective acceptable levels of quality, a resource management system is in place. A conservation system for FSA purposes requires only that the erosion control resource concern be treated.

The FSA Spurs Plan Development

Conservation plans have changed in format and degree of detail needed as agriculture, land use, and farmers' objectives have changed. The current effort is to facilitate the development of conservation plans so that all the farmers and ranchers who will need conservation plans to meet FSA requirements can have their plans developed quickly. This will mean working with

farmers in neighborhood groups, having farmers do some of the map work for their plans, and keeping documentation to a minimum.

The concepts of understanding the problem, considering alternate solutions, and selecting the best of the solutions are the heart of any planning process. This approach continues to be essential in carrying out soil and water conservation programs.